

History of Fairbury Schools

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According to William Le Baron's 1878 book, *The History of Livingston County*, Alonzo Straight taught the first school classes in Fairbury. He conducted his classes in a small existing building on the south side of the T. P. & W. Railroad.

The first structure built specifically as a school was built in 1860, at the northwest corner of Fourth and Maple Streets. Smith Olney was the first teacher in this building. It was a two-story frame structure, and the cost was \$2,500. This would be equivalent to \$70,600 in today's dollars.

The second structure built as a school was the South Side School House. It was built in 1868 at the northeast corner of Fourth Street and Route 24. It was also a two-story frame building, and its cost was \$3,500. This would be equivalent to \$66,700 in today's dollars. In 1878, the teachers at these two schools were: Prof. C. H. Rew, Principal of the High School Department; Miss M. M. Daly, Assistant in the High School Department; Miss Ella B. Erwin, Teacher of the Second Grammar Department; Philip Hutchinson, Teacher of the First Grammar Department; Miss Della Chesebrough, Teacher of the Second Intermediate; Miss Cynthia E. Earnhart, Teacher of the First Intermediate; Miss Laura Colvin, Teacher of the Second Primary; Miss Anna E. McDowell, Teacher of the South Primary; Mrs. S. M. Hempstead, Teacher of the North Primary; Miss Mary Kilbury, Teacher of the West Primary and Intermediate School.

In 1880, the South Side School was built using a brick structure. The construction cost was \$13,000. This would be equivalent to \$342,000 in today's dollars. This brick school was built at the same location as the former frame structure and was designed for a maximum capacity of 400 students.

In 1892, the high school diploma granted to Jesse Frances Ramsey had an illustration of the brick school at the northeast corner of Fourth Street and Route 24.

In 1895, the frame structure school building at the northwest corner of Fourth and Maple Streets was sold to Dr. Brewer. At the same site, the new Fairbury High School was built using a brick structure.

Around 1900, a large meteorite that had fallen south of Fairbury was moved to the north playground area of the South Side School. Ed Lovett, school Custodian and his brother-in-law Ed Moore, hired Bob Harris, house-mover, to haul the rock to the schoolyard. The meteorite was sixteen inches high and thirty-six inches in diameter. According to an October 1958 *Blade* article, Dean Voorhees investigated and determined that if this were really a meteorite, it would be the largest ever found in the United States.

In 1913, the high school diploma granted to Aldine Hanna had an illustration of the brick school at the northwest corner of Fourth and Maple Streets.

In 1914, a new brick structure was built on North Seventh Street. It was named the Fairbury Township High School. It was completed in time for the 1914-1915 school year. The June 11, 1915, Blade noted that on a Friday night, pupils at the new high school building painted the numerals "15," being the numerals of this year's graduating class of the school, on the building. They were painted in red over the main entrance and also on the concrete sidewalk in front of the main entrance. On the invitation of the school superintendent, members of the class removed the decorations Saturday.

After the new high school was placed in service, the other two brick schools were named the North and South Side Schools. Apparently, citizens thought fancier names were needed for these two grade schools. A city-wide naming contest was held in May of 1918. The winners of the naming contest were Isaac Walton for the North Side school and Edison for the South Side School. Isaac Walton donated \$1,000, so the school's manual training department could purchase machinery for the students to use. When Isaac Walton died in 1913, in his will, he left another \$1,000 for the manual training department. Today, we would call this the Industrial Arts department.

Thomas Edison was a famous inventor known for inventing the light bulb and many other devices. The other less popular names were Washington, Lincoln, and Betsy Ross.

By the late 1940s, mechanization had eliminated the need for a large number of farmers and their children to cultivate the fields. This led to the closing of the country schools and consolidation of schools. In 1949, the citizens of Fairbury and Cropsey voted to consolidate their schools. The name of the high school was changed to Fairbury-Cropsey High School.

The post World War II Baby Boom created a massive number of school-age children. By the 1960s, Fairbury's two grade schools were nearing the end of their useful lives. In 1964, Westview grade school was built on south First Street. In 1965, Edison School was closed and sold. The building was torn down, and an apartment building now occupies that location. The current location of the school bell and meteorite are unknown.

1972 was the last year of classes for Isaac Walton grade school. It was torn down in 1974 and is now the Methodist Church parking lot. The school bell was saved by Jack Tollensdorf. He eventually donated it to Central Park in Fairbury, where it is on permanent display.

In 1985, the Prairie Central School district was formed through a consolidation vote. It combined the Fairbury-Cropsey, Forrest, and Chatsworth schools. A few years later, Chenoa was added to the Prairie Central system.

In 1997, after eighty-three years of service, the old Fairbury Township High School building was torn down.

Many current Fairbury residents have fond memories of sliding down the tubular fire escapes at Isaac Walton, Edison, and the old high school. Many people who attended Edison School remember the funny looking meteorite in the playground area.

It is likely the school facilities in Fairbury will continue to adapt as existing structures reach the end of their useful lives, and the number of students served changes in future years.





